

VOLUME 11, No. 1

JANUARY 1966

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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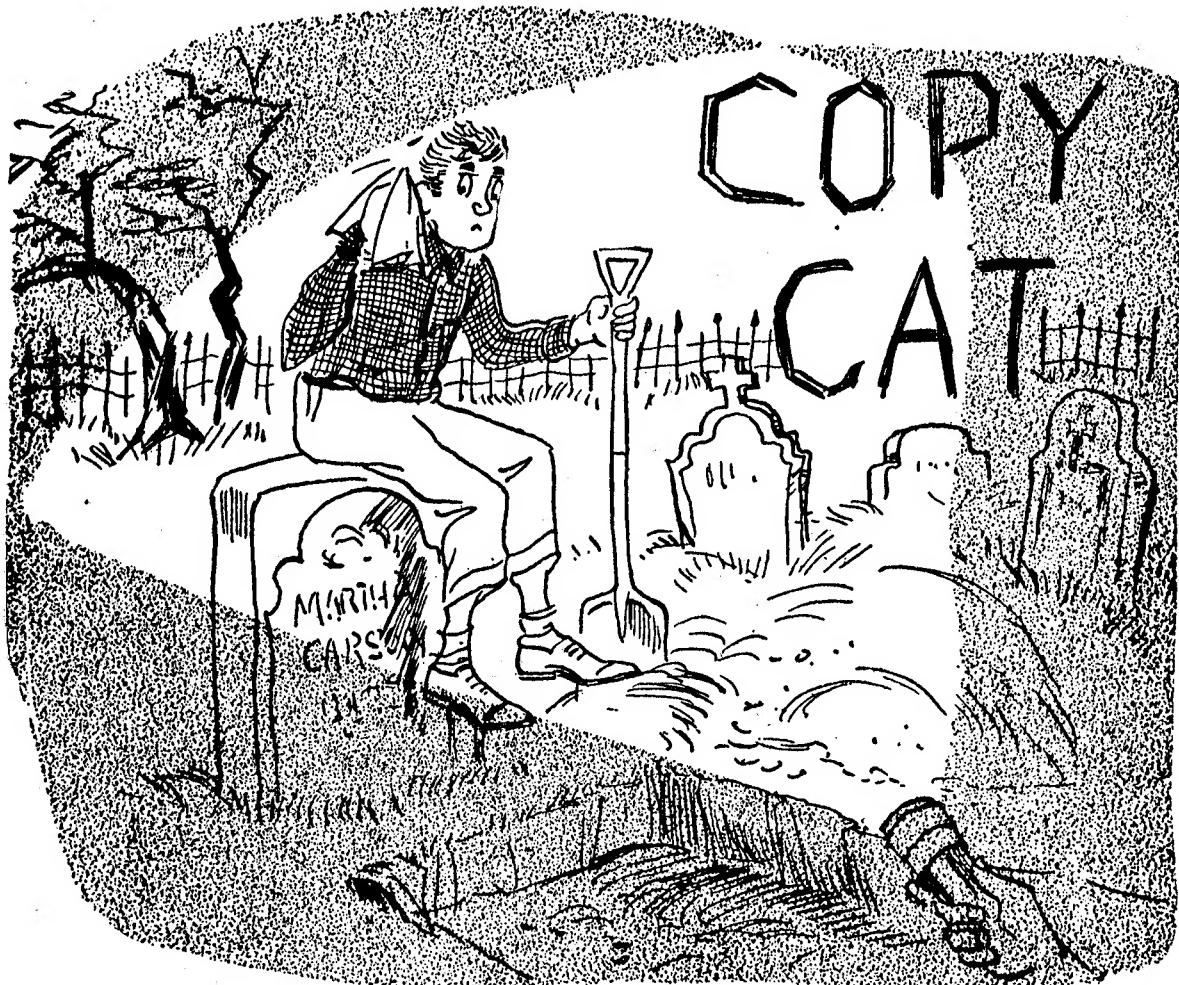
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Truth is said to be indigenous to women and poets, yet to see is not always to perceive.



I HAPPENED to be sitting on the headstone, taking a minute's breather, when the flashlights were suddenly turned on me.

The voice was harsh. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

I stood up and leaned on my shovel. "Digging."

The same voice turned to acid. "Having a hard time?"

"No," I said, "the ground is still soft. It's a fresh grave."

I hadn't heard them coming, but now in the moonlight I could make out their figures. There were three of them—two were policemen, the third was undoubtedly the cemetery caretaker.

The caretaker spoke. "He probably would have got away with it,

but I was looking for my dog when I saw what was happening and called you cops." He looked down into the grave. "He only got down a foot or so. It's still a long way to the coffin."

One of the policemen wore sergeant's stripes. "And just what are you digging for, mister? Mushrooms?"

"Of course not, Sergeant," I said. "However it could be truffles. They grow under the ground, you know." I glanced at the headstone and then I sighed. "Actually I was digging up my sonnet."

There were a few moments' silence, then evidently the other policeman felt impelled to relay some information. "That's a poem, Sergeant."

"I *know* that's a poem," the sergeant snapped, though there was

By
Jack Ritchie

the hint of defensiveness in his tone.

"You see, Sergeant," I said, "when Martha died I was utterly devastated. And so naturally I composed a sonnet delineating my dejection, my complete sense of loss. It was truly the loveliest poetry I'd ever written and it was to be my monument to her. I

slipped the manuscript into her coffin while she was on view in the funeral parlor."

"But now you're digging it up?"

"Yes, Sergeant," I said. "You see I tossed and turned and it came to me that I was being incredibly selfish in keeping Martha's virtues to myself. How would the world know of her goodness, her nobility, her beauty, if I allowed my immortal words to molder in the grave?"

The sergeant looked at his partner for a moment and then turned back to me. "What was the matter? Couldn't you remember what type words you wrote?"

I shook my head. "Unfortunately retentive memory is not one of my assets, even in connection with my own poems."

He showed white teeth. "Why didn't you just make a carbon copy of the sonnet while you were at it? That would have saved you a lot of exercise and trouble." He let the beam of his flashlight linger on the headstone. "Are you her husband?"

"No," I said. "An admirer from afar."

The sergeant scratched his head. "I've seen kooks in my time, but you get the blue ribbon. Not that I believe you. I got the suspicion that you're just an old-fashioned grave robber." He took my arm.

"All right, mister, let's take your story to the lieutenant."

At police headquarters I was kept waiting for quite some time before I was shown into the office of a Lieutenant Wilson.

He studied some notes. "This might all end up with a psychiatrist, but I'll give it a try first." He looked at me. "You've heard of necrophilia?"

"Of course," I said. "But I am not a necrophile. As far as I am concerned, a dead body is a dead body and nothing more. It is Martha's soul, her spirit, which is important, and that is in heaven."

"But your poem is in her coffin?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-one."

"This Martha Carson whose grave you were digging up was forty-six."

"Age means nothing," I said. "It was her inner ageless beauty that I admired."

He consulted his notes again. "Her husband's a machinist. She spent about two weeks in a hospital before she died. Kidney trouble. She was a housewife."

"She was a housewife to the world," I said. "She was the eternal woman to me."

"Were you a friend of the family?"

"None knew that I existed," I said. "Except Martha."

"You had some kind of affair?"

I stared at him coldly. "It was our minds that met and touched."

He winced a bit. "What do you do for a living?"

"I have an independent income."

"But you write poetry? Have you ever been published?"

"Not yet. Editors are a pack of fools. I will probably have to resort to a vanity house if my poems are to see the light of day."

He studied me. "Since you have an independent income, I don't imagine money means too much to you?"

"Absolutely nothing."

He nodded slowly. "But you have no objections to fame?"

"Well," I said, "it is a bit difficult for a new poet to establish an audience."

He smiled. "And so a little publicity would help, wouldn't it? A little *notoriety*?"

I took out a handkerchief and wiped my forehead. "I don't know what you mean."

The smile disappeared. "I think you do. I have the idea that you hoped to be caught. You would have remained at that grave until you *were* caught. And I also have the suspicion that you have a nice little routine all rehearsed for the reporters you hope to talk to."

I wiped my palms and said nothing.

His eyes were cold. "I don't think I'd have to go to the trouble to read your poems to know that you can't be much of a poet."

I looked up. "Really? Why?"

"Because you're not very original." He picked up one of the sheets of paper on his desk. "When I heard your little story, it struck a note and I went to the encyclopedia to check. Have you ever heard of Dante Gabriel Rossetti?"

I cleared my throat. "Possibly."

"Rossetti was an English poet and painter of the nineteenth century. When his wife died in 1862, a number of his poems in manuscript were interred with her body. But later Rossetti got to thinking it over and he had them exhumed. They were published in *Poems by D. G. Rossetti* in 1870."

He regarded me evenly. "Is that what you were hoping to do? Pull another Rossetti?"

I avoided his eyes.

He pointed a finger. "I could book you for desecrating a grave, but I think that's exactly what you want. And I'll be hanged if the department is going to be a party to your publicity stunt."

"Lieutenant," I said, "no harm really will be done, you know. Suppose I dedicate my volume of

poems to your fine police de . . ."

Color had raced to his face and he pointed again. "Get out! And if we ever catch you near that grave again we'll see that you're put away in a place where mattresses are pasted on the walls."

When I told Big Nick Healy all about it, he laughed. "I like a man who can think on his feet. I guess education and a little reading pay off now and then."

He went to the safe, took out ten thousand dollars, and handed it to me. "They could have stacked you away in the looney bin for a couple of years, but I guess that's better than the electric chair."

He lit his cigar. "All right. Like I promised, you get the promotion too. I'm sending you to the West Coast to take over the Los Angeles area. Lopez is retiring legitimate. Bad heart."

He blew smoke in my direction. "Just work with the organization and you'll get to the top. Don't try anything fancy or get any independent ideas. If you do, I'll get somebody to take care of you like you took care of Charley Larson."

I grinned. "And find a real good place to hide my body?"

When the police had caught me, I hadn't been digging.

I had been filling in.